

Interwoven

CHOICES: PART FOUR

29th Day of the Shining Light, 17 AoE

“I am hardly the most qualified for this.”

The march toward the castle’s main gate saw Tobias carefully pick his way about the leavings of the stable beasts, lest the gryphon leavings ruin his shoes. His scowled with irritation and frustration as Zane moved beside him, the wolf’s gait forced to slow as the prince danced about the mess all around them. “And by all that is reasonable, when are the stablemasters going to manage this place? Surely *someone* has the time to clean up the entrance to our castle. Ugh!”

“The garrison inspection is a time-honoured tradition, my prince, and this year the responsibility is yours.” Zane didn’t bother to answer the second question as he waved toward the gate guards. Tobias glanced up mid-step, narrowly avoiding the ruin of his right shoe as he watched them pull open the gates for his passage. “Given you will be in Ingsbren before the next inspection you would ordinarily take on, you need only endure this one. Your father has already told you what you must do. The inspection will be uncomplicated, and then you can return to your books and private affairs.”

“Yes, well I...” He trailed off as a servant approached from the direction of the gate. Even with head bowed, he could tell they were a hyena. His eyes went wide. Of course. Of *course* William had returned! It hadn’t worked out with becoming a soldier, so he’d come back to the safety of the castle. Tobias picked up his pace as he rushed forward to meet him halfway.

It wasn’t until the flash of blue eyes when *she* lifted *her* head that Tobias stumbled and stalled in place. It wasn’t William at all. It was someone else entirely, though still around his age and general build. As she drew closer Tobias could see her more clearly; it was madness that he’d mistaken her for William at all. She was much shorter than he was, her headfur allowed to grow much longer than he’d ever dared, and with a slightly thicker middle to her.

The reason for her approach became clearer as he looked at her arms. In them rested a sheathed sword – *his* sword, never used but essential to the inspection, apparently – she no doubt had been ordered to deliver to him. That brief surge of hope that had come out of nowhere vanished as quickly as it had been born, leaving the tiger confused as to why it had burst into being at all.

There was no time to ruminate on it however. As the gates swung more fully open, the hyena reached him. She bowed her head once more. “My prince. Your sword, polished and prepared for you.”

“I... thank you.” He reached out, paws trembling as he took the sheath and sword from her. She bowed deeper and took a step back, arms at her sides as he affixed the sheathed weapon to his belt. “I don’t... think I’ve seen you about before.”

She kept her head down. “No, my prince. I’ve only recently entered His Majesty’s employ. Pray forgive my appearance; I had little time to prepare myself to be in your presence and also prepare and deliver the sword as ordered.”

Her voice was softer than William’s too. Tobias squeezed his eyes shut and forced the thoughts of his old friend from his mind as best he could. William was gone. William wanted nothing to do with him, and he wanted nothing to do with William. If he wanted to go off and play soldier, so much the better! “No, it’s quite alright. Thank you for your diligence.” He reached to his side and pulled the sword partway free as Zane made his way over to his side.

The iron all but gleamed in the morning sun. It was a good testament to her work, and he allowed the weapon to slide to rest in the sheath once more. “I will pass on word of your good work here. You may go.”

“I thank you, my prince. It is my honour to serve.” She bowed deeper and spread her arms out wide before she stepped back and began to make her way around him. She paused, looking up and back at him as she left, and her ears tipped back as she hurriedly turned her eyes forward again.

Tobias watched her leave as Zane tapped his shoulder. “You could do much worse, my prince.”

The tiger whirled on the kingsguard and shoved him in the side. “Absolutely not! I told you a thousand times now, I am not some lecherous fiend!” He shoved Zane again, but the wolf barely moved until Tobias started walking toward the gate. “By all that’s... you need to get this idea out of your head. Your head, Sarina’s head... *everyone* needs to stop telling me who I need to bed!” He growled under his breath. “I don’t want to bed *anyone*. Not until the rite of new life, with my wife.”

“There is no shame in that dedication, my prince.” Zane smiled to himself as he walked beside, and Tobias fought the urge to fix him with a glare. Something about Sarina’s offer still, *seasons* later, tickled the wolf to no end. “Consider, though, the merits of such a thing.”

“I’ve considered, I’ve thought, I’ve pondered, I’ve contemplated, and I’ve done a thousand more things that mean the same and I am *not* interested.” Tobias sighed as he glanced around the main road out of the castle. The barracks wasn’t far, and he just wanted to finish up with this as quickly as possible and get back home again. Especially if it meant no more suggestions from Zane. “If I have to be alone until Sarina comes of age... so be it. I’ve been alone my whole life; now need not be different.”

The words rang hollow even as he said them, but Zane held his tongue. That mercy was not lost on Tobias, who sighed even as he set his expression to a practiced image of royal composure. No, he’d not been alone his whole life. No, he’d only been alone for the last couple of years.

And no. He did not like it.

Traveling beyond the walls of the castle only exacerbated matters. His gaze drifted over the people as they lived and worked, doing what they could to earn enough crowns to put food on their tables and keep roofs over their heads. Hard lives, but honest lives. Lives shared. Lives

uncomplicated. Tobias wasn't prone to jealousy, but that's what struck him each and every single time he left the castle to see what lay beyond. Jealousy.

He was grateful for Zane's silence as they approached the garrison. Tobias had been loathe to even approach it after William had left. The last thing he wanted was news that the hyena had been deployed to die on some battlefield for a king he hated. Even as he looked across the training yard and the soldiers arrayed before him, he felt a new twinge in his chest. Would it be so bad if William had left? If he'd died somewhere? If he did, would the hole in his heart finally start to mend? Or would it just keep growing? No answers had ever brought Tobias comfort.

"Something is wrong." He glanced up at Zane's words to see the wolf looking intently over the arrayed soldiers.

Tobias followed his gaze, but couldn't make out any trouble. He'd never known Zane to be wrong. "What is it?"

"Commander Rachel, daughter of Ruth. She was supposed to be here." Zane started ahead by a couple of steps before he remembered his place. He paused for Tobias to catch up as he shook his head. "Something may have happened."

They wouldn't find out until they arrived, and so Tobias picked up the speed of his steps. Zane did the same to stay with him, and nodded his thanks to the prince in turn. The effort wasn't entirely altruistic, of course. If something was wrong, better that they discover and address it as quickly as possible. Tobias' eyes flicked this way and that. Beyond the castle lay threats around every corner. The panther kids playing in an alley? Unlikely. The hyena eyeing them while conversing with a coyote merchant? Possibly. The deer sharpening a sword on a bench closer to the garrison? Who could say? The prince couldn't discount any of them.

"Company, stand to!" The shout drew Tobias' attention to a relatively short but fierce-looking fox, devoid of armour but wearing the crisp uniform of a commander. Behind him, the ranks and rows of soldiers immediately snapped to attention. "All deference to our Prince Tobias of Ratholarin!"

The soldiers smoothly dropped to one knee, but did not bow their heads as Tobias and Zane approached. He looked them over even as Zane continued ahead toward the fox. "Geoffery? What are you doing here? Where's Rachel?"

The fox frowned and glanced over toward Tobias. The prince nodded back to him. "Go ahead. Please."

He still hesitated, but eventually turned his gaze back on Zane. "You didn't know? Ain't nothing bad, old friend. Underwent the trials, and got brought into the kingsblades. I thought you had something to do with it."

As Tobias looked on, Zane all but sagged with relief. Whoever this Rachel was, she was important to his old friend. "No. No, I put in the recommendation a year ago. They must have finally read it." The wolf's eyes tracked across the soldiers. "She was meant to be presenting the garrison."

"Yeah, and she was *in charge* of the garrison. Now we're stuck here." The fox shrugged and waved back at his gathered warriors. "Until there's a new garrison commander appointed,

we're not deploying. We wouldn't be here, otherwise." He glanced over at Tobias and straightened up again. "But don't you worry, your highness! Your soldiers stand ready for inspection. I am certain you'll be pleased with the quality of the warriors who stand ready to defend your home with their lives."

"I have no doubt, commander." Tobias nodded to him as he straightened up and cast his eyes back across the arrayed soldiers. A variety of species stared straight ahead from their place on their knees. Wolves and coyotes, tigers and panthers, bears and deer and rats and hyenas and- Tobias frowned as he paused his sweep. There, in the first row behind the commander of the company, he was.

William.

He almost missed the hyena in the crowd. He looked so different, armed and armoured and arrayed in a field of soldiers. William seemed broader. Confident, even, as he stared forward along with the others. Tobias almost had to pick his jaw up off the ground. It was such a striking change, and it hadn't been all that long. Not even half a year, and he was so much more mature. It was stunning. It was impressive.

Alluring, even.

He choked that feeling right back down as hard as he could as soon as it reared its head. His eyes flicked to the commander and Tobias nodded to the fox. "Ahem. I am ready, commander. If you would, please?"

"Of course, my prince." He nodded to Tobias and turned on his heel to face aside. "Company! Stand!" As one, the arrayed soldiers lifted one leg and then swiftly rose back to attention. "Face left!" They twisted as one, directing their vision parallel to the commander's. "Present arms!" Each of the soldiers drew their swords and lifted their other arms to rest the blade flat across them.

The fox stood taller and nodded once. "At your leisure, my prince. They are ready for you, on my honour."

"Thank you, commander." Tobias' eyes lingered on William but he forced himself to focus on his task, drinking in the arrayed soldiers of Ratholarin. As impressive as their cohesion was, he had more to inspect than just that. The tiger clasped his paws behind his back as he started down the line.

Zane and the fox followed along him, nodding along as Tobias looked over each soldier in turn. With each warrior he found himself more and more impressed at the quality of their training; they had done amazing work preparing for the inspection. Uniforms almost perfect. Weapons and armour almost immaculately maintained. Decorum maintained. The occasional mistakes or the rare imperfection were hardly worth calling out, so few and far between were they. "You do yourself credit, commander. Your warriors are exceptional."

"We are honoured to hear it, my prince." The commander bowed his head. "I am glad that my confidence in them has not been misplaced."

Tobias nodded as he found himself brought back around toward William again. He favoured the hyena with a smile as he passed by, but it wasn't returned. It was as though he

wasn't even there. The tiger frowned and paused for a moment. Had he missed the smile? Was he just focused on his display? Or... "William?"

The eyes of the bear to William's side flicked toward him for a moment before they turned forward again. William's didn't shift at all, but the hyena stiffened further. "Sir."

Tobias' heart sank.

So that was it. William was *that* done with him. Who they'd been, what they'd been... it didn't matter to him anymore. He bit back a sigh. The tiger should have known better. Of course he didn't care. Why would he? "Are you... happy? Here?"

Behind William, a couple of the soldiers snickered to themselves. Tobias glared through the ranks to try and find the offenders as an equally irritated commander shouldered his way through the ranks to seek them out. William, however, didn't react to the chuckles. "Yes, sir."

The cold precision behind the hyena's responses earned a surge of irritation from Tobias. He didn't deserve this. He was trying to be nice. He was trying to be kinder than William deserved. Why did he have to be like that? "Step forward, soldier."

The bear's eyes flicked toward him again, but William took that single step forward without hesitation. There was a new tightness in his expression; his jaw was clenched and his nostrils flared. Zane placed a paw on Tobias' shoulder. "My prince-

"My job is to inspect the soldiers. That is what I am doing." The tiger scowled as he started to circle William, and he ignored the sigh from Zane. If he could find something wrong, he could pull William aside and ask him what was going on. Why he was being so cold. Why he had to do this to Tobias again.

But as he looked over William with a fine and exacting pair of eyes, the less likely that seemed. The hyena, for everything, seemed to have adapted to military life well. His uniform was perfect. His armour and weapon polished to a shine. He didn't flinch at anything Tobias had done.

He was a perfect soldier, and that was only all the more irritating. There was nothing at all for him to pick on. There was nothing to call out. He had no choice but to step back toward Zane and nod. "Very well. You may return to your place, soldier."

"Sir." William took his one step back and lined up once more with the formation. Not once did he meet Tobias' gaze. He didn't even look at the prince.

The commander returned to Tobias' side, looking in confusion at William. "I trust you are satisfied, my prince?"

"Yes. Yes, of course. As I said, your soldiers do you great credit." He turned back to the commander and offered a nod. "I can tell you were frustrated at your inability to deploy. However, I am glad that you did not. It gave me the privilege of seeing such fine examples of Ratholarin might." He forced a smile to his muzzle. "I will take word back to my father. King Eric will hear of your impeccable work, and you and your soldiers shall have his blessing."

"We are honoured, my prince." He sank down to one knee, and as one so too did the formation of soldiers. Tobias glanced back at William, but as ever the hyena ignored him. The

tiger might have growled. If William heard, he still didn't reply. The fox rose a moment later and turned sharply back toward his soldiers. "Dismissed!"

Each of the soldiers lifted and stomped their right foot twice. They began to break the formation almost immediately after, dropping into more relaxed stances and beginning light conversation. More than a few began to whisper in hushed tones while looking Tobias over.

His attention was on William, though. The hyena turned away and started back toward the barracks. The bear at his side reached out to catch his arm, and Tobias frowned as the soldier said something to William he couldn't hear. William's head turned slightly and he replied. The tiger inhaled and took a single step forward.

That was all he managed before William patted the bear's paw. He watched as the soldier smiled and nodded to him, and the two went their separate ways; William back toward the garrison and the bear off deeper into the training yard. Evidently the hyena had made friends in his time away. Maybe he didn't need Tobias anymore. He certainly didn't want the tiger, from the way he'd acted in formation.

"My prince?" The commander's voice drew Tobias' attention back from William, and he saw that Zane stood then at the fox's side as well. "Was there something about young William that caught your eye? Something out of place I ought pull him up on?"

"I... no, commander. He was perhaps among the most well-prepared of your soldiers. I just... wanted to make sure of something." He nodded to the fox and tried a smile. "You have done an admirable job. Compliments from the king will be forthcoming, I assure you." As the fox bowed his head, Tobias looked back up at Zane. "We had best get back, as well. My father will want his report."

"Mmm." The wolf nodded and patted the commander's shoulder before he re-joined Tobias' side. "I will speak with you later, Geoffery."

The fox nodded back as Zane stood beside Tobias. The tiger turned away and made back for the road to the castle. The kingsblade smoothly walked beside him. "A fine display."

"Yes, I thought so. For the most part." He scowled at the ground as he sighed. "William must truly hate me to ignore me so. I could understand and forgive his hurt feelings, but must he be so cruel?"

Zane didn't answer in words, but a quiet growl rolled out of him. Tobias frowned up at his protector. "If you've something to say, then say it. Don't just seethe and growl at me under your breath. Am I wrong?"

"Immensely, my prince, and insultingly so."

Tobias almost tripped over himself. Of all the responses he could have predicted... "Excuse me?" He turned on Zane immediately and folded his arms. "Explain."

The wolf stared down at him in silence for a moment. Tobias could almost feel the weight of Zane's gaze push him into the road. "Why do you think he was there today, my prince? Was he presenting himself to speak with you? Spend time with you? Throw some dice, drink a little?"

“Of course not. He was there presenting for inspection.” Tobias shook his head. “I am a prince. If he stepped out of line to be a little friendlier to me, I would have forgiven it.”

“But his commander would not have. His peers would not have. His captain would not have.” Zane’s stare was unchanged, but if anything it seemed all the more intense. It took more and more effort to meet the wolf’s eyes. “You put him in an impossible situation, my prince. He could drop his duty and suffer for it later, or he could hold to it and do you – and his company – proud.” He tilted his head ever so slightly. “And you make a bold assumption that he would wish to speak with you as friends.”

“Surely he would not hold a grudge for what happened. He knows well that I had no choice.” Tobias finally relented, looking away and around the street. “What was I to do, Zane? What was the right course of action? You speak of him not forsaking his duty this day, but that is what I did years ago with him and now he...” His jaw locked up as his throat tightened.

But Zane wasn’t about to relent. “He owes you nothing.” Tobias turned angry eyes back up on Zane, but the kingsblade’s expression was as measured as ever. “All you did for him was in the name of friendship. Noble. And then, you decided that his companionship was unsuitable for you.”

“I didn’t make that decision!”

“Then who did?” Zane’s eyes narrowed as Tobias shrunk back. “Did your father enforce it? Your brothers? The same people who you have pushed back against from the day you met him?” The wolf shook his head and waved for Tobias to keep moving, not that the tiger was capable of working his legs in that moment. “His mother demanded he never see you again. He lied to her and deceived her, as much as it hurt him to do so, just to be in your presence. To share time with you. He decided your companionship was worth it.”

“And he r...” Tobias lowered his voice; he’d been about to explode into distinctly undignified shouting in the middle of the city streets. “And he ruined my reputation with a childish infatuation, leaving me in a position now where I’m expected to... to purchase whores and stage affairs and put my escapades in public display!”

“You are making a public display right now, my prince.” Zane didn’t look away but Tobias did, and indeed more than a couple townspeople were glancing in his direction. Whether it was for the conversation they were having, the intensity of said conversation, or the fact that they so rarely saw royalty beyond the castle was unclear. “Perhaps this is not the best time or place for such a discussion.”

“No. Perhaps it is not.” He angrily thrust a paw behind him. “After you. We’ll go back home and... not discuss this matter anymore. I tire of it.”

“As you say, my prince.” Zane bowed his head and stepped forward. Tobias fell in behind him, though his expression didn’t lighten in the least.

Such a thing wouldn’t really be possible. He was only all the more wound up. Yes, he’d asked Zane to speak. He’d drawn the answer out of him. But the insults? Were they really warranted? It wasn’t as though Tobias had done wrong. If William had to adhere to his duty, then surely it was no different for the tiger. If he had to respect William’s duty, then William should damn well have to respect his own. Right?

If nothing else, surely the two were even now. He'd upset William when he'd been forced to cull their friendship. Now, William had upset him while he'd tried to reach out to the hyena. Equal pain. Fair. Perhaps now, if there was a chance, they could discuss like grown adults and work out their differences. Or perhaps William would still need time to mature and gain perspective.

That was something Tobias knew he wouldn't be able to help him with. Whether anyone at all could would be up to him, but maybe joining the Ratholarin army would do him some good. Maybe it would be just what William needed to temper his emotional impulses. Bring him in line.

Tobias could only hope.

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Sullen silence was all that Tobias offered anyone and everyone as he made his way through the castle. Zane had left him on his order to report on the inspection to his father. Numerous other servants on the way were dismissed before they could speak to him or offer him whatever it was they were on about. The royal tailor and scribe both started to ask him questions as he passed them by, and both clearly thought better of it once they got a nice, good look at him. He might as well have been Fredrick, the way he angrily stormed the halls.

That thought might have been sobering were Tobias in a better mood, but as he reached his chambers and slammed the door closed behind him, all he wanted to do was collapse. He almost did that too, but a look down at his state of dress robbed him of the idea. If he flopped down on his bed he'd probably dislodge one of the stupid medals or insignias or whatever that he'd been forced to wear as part of his royal attire. If he died stabbing himself through the heart on a flimsy piece of metal... well, he supposed he wouldn't care anymore, at the very least.

It would leave him the laughing stock of Ratholarin for the rest of time, however. And so instead he carefully unclipped the medals and the insignias and the whatever else, gathered them up in one paw, and hurled them against the wall.

They clattered to the ground as he finally slumped down atop the bed. Tobias rolled over to stare up at the ceiling, panting more out of anger than breathlessness. "Why?" The whispered word came as his eyes darted back and forth.

Why? The question hung in the air, defiant of the weight it carried. Why was everything like this? Why was it all the way it was? Why did things have to play out the way they did; why couldn't he have made them different; why did he have to suffer for it? Why did he hurt? Why, in spite of knowing he had to do what he did, did he *hurt*?

Tobias had done everything right. He'd done everything that he'd been supposed to do. He'd toed the line; he'd followed his orders; he'd done everything he'd been told he had to do. Why, then, did it hurt? Why, in spite of it being the right thing? Why? Why?

"M-my prince?"

The tiger's eyes went wide. His head snapped to the side and revealed a cowering figure in the corner by the still-closed door. It hadn't opened – he'd have heard if it had – but there she stood regardless. It was the same servant who'd brought his sword to him outside. Tears streaked across his muzzle as he frowned at her. "What are you doing here?"

She stammered for a second as she bowed her head and pressed back harder into the corner. “A-attending your room, my prince. As instructed. I’m sorry, I didn’t expect you back so soon, and I hadn’t finished, and then you...” She gulped and sank down to her knees. “Beg your pardon, my prince. I will leave if it is your wish.”

“Yes, I...” The words faded away, the request dead before it could fully be formed. Tobias sat up slowly and wiped his paw across his eyes, streaking his fur even as he tried to compose himself. “No. No, it’s... it’s okay. You can stand... it’s alright.” He closed his eyes and sighed. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to scare you, I just...”

She didn’t say anything, but a glance up showed that her head had indeed lifted slightly. The hyena looked at him, but there was nothing accusatory or mocking or jubilant in her face. There was something else that shone in her eyes. Concern? Or was it pity?

That was perfect. Tobias sighed and allowed himself to flop back down on the bed again. How like him. Such a spectacular mess of a failure that even the servants pitied him. “Make sure you take a nice, good look to laugh at later. I’m sure my brothers would *love* to hear about this, if you wanted to curry favour with one of them.”

“I don’t... I’m sorry, my prince, but... why would I laugh?” Concern and confusion reigned in her tone as he heard her footsteps cautiously on approach. “Is... there something I may do to be of service?”

“Apparently there is, but I don’t...” He sighed again and brought both paws up to cover his face. He rubbed vigorously as he shook his head under them. “Let me give you some advice, uh...” The prince paused, and then parted his fingers. Tobias lifted his head just enough to bring the hyena back into view. “What was your name?”

She blinked. “Juni, my prince.”

“Juni. Some advice for you, then.” He slumped back down again. “Never become a princess. Or royalty, or nobility, or anything like that. It’s not worth it.” The words felt good to get out of him. Not like a burden lifted, but certainly some small degree of pressure released. Admitting it to himself years ago had been easy, but saying it to anyone outside of William had been much, much harder.

And that thought brought William back to mind again, and sharpened the malaise in his heart all over. Tobias groaned to himself. There had to be something. Something, anything that he could do to relieve himself of it. As he forced himself to sit up, he noticed that Juni remained in his room. She was halfway toward him, paws clasped before her and her eyes firmly down. “You’re... still here.”

She glanced aside and brushed down her robe. She couldn’t have been much older than William, perhaps only a season or two senior to Tobias. “You said that there was something that may help, my prince. If it is within my power, it is my honour to serve.”

His eyes widened. No. He wouldn’t even consider that. “Absolutely not. No, there’s nothing you... I mean, I can’t just...” He groaned and rubbed at his face again as he fought to find the words. Honesty had always come so easily to him; lies were so much harder. His posture, his standing, and his reputation all relied on him carefully controlling what people thought of him.

And what people already thought of him was the problem. Everyone. They all looked at him and saw weakness. Inferiority. His parents. His brothers. Even William, he didn't doubt. Surely William, strong and capable warrior of the Ratholarin army, wouldn't look twice at him now. The hyena hadn't, had he? Weak. Feeble. Useless little Tobias. Everyone could see it. His fingers curled inward, claws just shy of scratching out his own eyes as the tears threatened to flow again.

He tugged his paws down his cheeks. Juni still stood there, shoulders drooped, tail limp enough to brush the floor. She hadn't left. To be fair, he hadn't dismissed her, either. He could. And yet, despite that fact, Tobias found himself reluctant to. Being alone was an even worse thought. "May I... ask you something, Juni?"

Her head twitched upward, but her gaze remained firmly on the ground. "Yes, my prince?"

"I would... what have you heard? Exactly." He frowned as he glanced down at his paws. They wrung each other nervously; this wasn't a conversation he generally had with people. For some reason though, the words just came out. "I mean, I know there are... *whispers*. About me. I don't know what they say though, because no one really tells me for sure, and..."

Juni began to frown, but she took a tentative step forward regardless. "It's... not really my place to comment on gossip, my prince. I pay such things no mind, and-"

"Please?" He looked up as the hyena did and squeezed his paws tightly together. "You won't be in trouble. I promise. You've nothing to fear." His shoulders slumped. "Though I suppose I could understand if you did. You said you'd not been here long. I imagine my brothers didn't make a good impression."

The hyena paused before she offered a slow nod. "There are... some, my prince... who speak of a servant here you bedded." She bowed her head again. "I did not believe them."

He frowned down at his paws. They squeezed tighter still, almost forcing his claws free. "And why is that, if I may ask?"

"Because... it would speak of kindness I would not expect from one of such station."

His paws relaxed. Head lifted. Juni's eyes remained fixed on the floor, but she held her paws at her sides and stood stock still. "I'm... sorry?"

She still didn't move. "I have served for six years, my prince, and every noble family I've worked for has been... at best, distant. To see me and those who serve as lesser." She glanced aside again. "The same rumours say that you loved... uh, *him*, and he you. If such stories were true, then... perhaps to serve you would not seem like we have no value." She gulped and shook her head. "But if they are not, then... that is of course fine, my prince; I wouldn't dare presume to-"

"It's alright." He held up a paw, and Juni's muzzle snapped shut so quickly he could hear it. The poor thing was afraid she'd crossed a line. Even her tail trembled. "They're... not true, I'm afraid. I never bedded a servant. He did love me though; that much *is* true. At least, I'm fairly certain of that much."

Juni swallowed hard and finally looked up enough to meet his gaze. “A sweet thing, to love one’s master. But you... did not love him in turn?”

Was there an answer to that question that made sense? That didn’t hurt? It was shades of *why* all over again; a question on a thousand tongues with a million answers and an infinite variety of potential pain. What to say? What *should* he say? What was truth? What was more than just truth?

He knew the truth, of course; Tobias had always known the truth and felt it deep in his heart. Admitting it, however, was quite something else even before one left aside the prospect of spilling it to a random servant. It was the truth that gave him no answers. It was the truth that hurt. None of that was a response for the hyena before him though, and so the prince sighed. “Of course I did, in my way. But I couldn’t... *be* what he wanted. I never could have. And as much as it would have hurt him, he couldn’t be what I needed him to be. Not once the whispers started.”

The hyena nodded slowly. “And... what did you need him to be?”

Tobias sighed. *He* hadn’t needed William to be anything more or less than he was. It was what everyone else needed him to be that had been so impossible. “He needed to be... well, a lot of things would have helped. If his family had money, or station, or power. But most of all?” He shook his head and rubbed at his face. “If he had been *female* then the mockery would... never have been what it was.”

“What was he like?” She reached out tentatively to him, but she let her paw fall short and come to rest atop the sheets instead. “If you... don’t mind the question, that is.”

Images came unbidden to the tiger’s mind; a brilliant series of flashes of times long since past. Their first meeting. The lessons he’d taught William. The kitchen raids and escapes from Tobias’ brothers. The quiet words. The secret confessions. Innocence, born of innocent souls in innocent times. “I’ve never known his like before. I... suspect I never will again.” His eyes opened as he stared back up at the ceiling again.

Juni remained silent, and so he allowed those memories to shape themselves into words. “He was... brilliant. Adventurous. Kind and fair, but strong and firm.” As the words flooded out, relief came with them as if he could grapple at last with all that he’d restrained for so long. Like he could be honest with someone outside of himself. “He tried to make everyone think the best of him by being the best he could be. In another life, he’d have made a wonderful king himself.

“And we played... oh, how we did. Pretended we were brothers even, and that we were both princes, or neither princes, and imagined how our lives would be. He gave me smiles on the days I had nothing but sorrow, and surety in times of doubt.” Tobias’ eyes fell closed again, but not before he caught Juni’s grin. “He and his mother worked the laundry often, and so he always smelled of the soaps and scented oils there.

“And his fur was so soft that his embrace was like sinking into a nice, clean, warm bed. Like the world didn’t matter beyond his reach. Like home. He... felt, and smelled, like home to me.” He took a deep breath, and could almost imagine that scent again sinking into him and that softness encompassing him. His heart ached, but not with pain. It ached with the truth. With his longing; that desire to be close to him again.

“My... ah, my prince?”

Tobias opened his eyes and turned his head. Juni was still facing him, but her gaze had dropped considerably. He followed her stare to his lap and immediately scrambled to cover himself with his paws. The bulge in his trousers throbbed insistently in response as Tobias fell slack-jawed over himself as he rushed to become presentable. His ears and cheeks burned, though only the former had the benefit of fur enough to mask his blush. “Gracious, I am so... I’m so, so sorry!”

Her stare continued to linger in place despite his best efforts, but she didn’t look amused, or mocking, or concerned. She didn’t even look afraid or shocked in that moment, though Tobias’ attention was definitely elsewhere at that moment. He’d not been prepared for such a visceral, physical reaction to his own memories. “You... damn it all, I’m just going to make things worse for myself now, aren’t I?”

That seemed to snap her out of it; Juni looked up and blinked. “My prince?”

“Word will get out now. Something like how I’m pining for a lost love, or some other such tripe, and I’ll...” He lifted one hand away from his stubborn erection and used it to rub over his muzzle. Worse. Everything would get worse. Not only was he *not* bedding some female, he was hardening at the memory of a male he no longer had even the slightest chance with. Throbbing like he only did in private moments, thinking about what could have been. Imagining what *should* have been.

A gentle paw brushed his leg.

Had he not been so consumed in his own thoughts, Tobias might have jumped at the brazenness of the touch. As it was, his head still snapped to the side and his fingers fell away from his face. Juni looked not at him, but down into his lap. “Your thoughts and feelings remain with him. I would not presume, but you can surely feel what even his memory does to you.”

Tobias babbled incoherently for a second as the paw on his thigh shifted closer to his barely-concealed bulge. The delicate touch of her fingers as they drew closer certainly did nothing to quell the strain in his trousers. “Juni, I-”

“I’m not him. I’ll never be him. No one would ever be him.” Her eyes lifted slowly until she met his gaze, and in that moment her paw slipped under his to squeeze at the tiger’s constricted malehood. “You can carry this burden on and order me away... but my place *is* to serve. Object and I will stop, my prince; I give you my word.”

Questions roamed wild in his mind – chief among them for one reason what specifically her servant role was in her previous employment – but the squeeze of someone else’s fingers against him for the first time was something to far beyond what he’d imagined that all of those questions fell away from him. He tried to find words. He tried to bring up William. Sarina. His family. His sense of right and wrong.

But nothing more than a groan escaped his muzzle as her other paw joined the first. Tobias’ eyes rolled back in his head as he found himself leaning back, his legs spread further apart. Even his paw, its vain attempt at concealing his impropriety abandoned, flopped down at his side as if in silent acceptance.

He did notice and glance aside as her weight shifted on the bed. Tobias watched as the hyena's paws remained hard at work, rubbing and stroking him through his trousers. The scent of his arousal began to thicken much as his flesh had, and he shuddered at another squeeze as she settled herself down between his legs. Her head rose above his thighs, her eyes a flash of sky blue that carried with them an essence of the mischievous smile that tugged at her muzzle. In that expression, she was all the more like William.

He quaked, trembling at the thought of his old friend knelt there in her place; of his paws roaming his restrained malehood; of his fingers deftly unbinding his trousers to free it from its prison. Her fur was lighter than his, her eyes blue to his green, and her headfur longer by far, but he could almost see William there all the same. His blood quickened, heart racing with the notion.

His shaft all but sprang free under her efforts as his trousers opened. He gasped again, relief rolling out like a wave from that point of pressure released. That he was exposed so completely, flesh twitching and pulsing in front of Juni's face, sobered the prince up immediately. Regret and concern and fear rushed back into him, and he opened his muzzle to ask her to stop; to hold; to wait. And then his breath caught in his throat, and Tobias hesitated.

That was the same moment she opened her muzzle to swallow him whole.

As she did, the moan that was ripped from his mouth was guttural. The sudden, wet warmth that enveloped him from tip to root was, to someone who had never felt anything beyond his own two paws, overwhelming. Tobias slumped backward, his head left to bounce atop his bed as the hyena's tongue crawled up along the underside of his malehood.

His tongue became useless even as hers intensified its assault, curling this way and that around his shaft. Tobias' eyes were wide, his breath coming in sharp pants as confusion and pleasure and a million other myriad feelings vied for control over his mind and body. Delicate lips wrapped around his flesh as soft fingers slid under his shirt, rubbing up his belly. Tobias had heard stories, but never in anything other than his *wildest* fantasies would he have imagined this...!

He brought a paw up to stick in his mouth, biting down on it with a shuddering whimper. Juni's muzzle moved smoothly even as he tried futilely to lift his head and see her work, rising and falling to an unheard rhythm. Tobias felt himself throbbing inside her mouth as she teased him on. Still, on some level, he struggled to tell her to stop.

Whatever his rational mind might have intended, her muzzle sucked that free of him as well. He felt himself leaking, drooling across her tongue, only for her to hungrily slurp and lick it away. He felt himself growing more and more flushed beneath his fur as he squirmed and writhed in incoherent, virginal pleasure. Unable to see her face, his mind was left to conjure up the lascivious image of those coy blue eyes and that cheeky smile wrapped so tightly around him. His body lurched, legs closing slightly to rub at Juni's arms and sides as she continued to stroke and tease him.

And yet as she worked, Tobias' mind kept replacing her with William. Their similarities were few, but numerous enough for his imagination to allow for long-suppressed fantasies to be renewed with fresh inspiration. The tongue became William's; the fingers William's; the

eyes William's as they watched what he was doing to the tiger. William's muzzle. William's tongue. William's-

He gasped as his peak rushed up to meet him far, far faster than anything Tobias had ever felt before. He fought through the pleasure, holding himself back for a scant moment and only managing to grunt out a panicked, "I'm-!" before he was overwhelmed. The hyena pulled off him, fingers closing around the base of his shaft to stroke him quickly as he tumbled into the first orgasm someone else had ever given him. The tiger's eyes squeezed shut as his shaft jerked in Juni's paw.

Tobias arched his back, looking down his body to her just in time to catch the second spurt of his eruption. It painted a streak of pearly white across her face, eyes closed to shield them from the spray. Another joined it, and another, and another as he rode out his pleasure with desperate abandon. He watched her lean down and take his tip back into her mouth again, her lips pursed across the head of his shaft as he emptied himself into her muzzle. His eyes crossed at the sight as he gave up every drop he had to her.

And when at last there was nothing left to give, she finally disengaged. Her muzzle decoupled from his spent shaft, and spit-sticky fingers released his bunched-up sheath by the base. Silence filled the bedroom, punctuated only by Tobias' pants for breath and attempts to summon his rational mind back from the oblivion Juni had banished it to. His head lolled from side to side. Comprehension of what had just happened was the furthest thing from him in that moment.

And not just because of what she'd done, or of what he'd *let* her do. A storm of thoughts of William continued to cloud Tobias' mind as his imagination ran wild with hypotheticals. What could have been and what they could have done together had been mere flights of fantasy for the prince's lonely nights, but under Juni's efforts they were reignited with an intensity that felt like they might sear his mind anew. He knew what it felt like now. What William might have felt like if they...

It took more effort to lift his head than it had to do anything else in his life. When Tobias finally managed it, it was to the sight of the seed-streaked hyena up on her feet again. Her head was bowed but her fur bore the traces of what they'd done, and he had no doubt that the scent would cling to her in turn. Disgust and concern flooded in and Tobias gulped. What if she'd felt forced? What if she'd acted because she thought he'd wanted her to? What if she-

"My prince? Are you well?" Her gaze lifted slightly before she looked back down again. It was clear she didn't know what Tobias felt about their little encounter any better than Tobias himself did. "I... I'm sorry, if I've overstepped. When you said... I thought you might need... this. If I went too far, I beg your forgiveness."

As she spoke though, Tobias' eyes drifted lower. Servant dresses were usually pretty thick, to account for the grime and muck they had to work through. And yet, despite that, Juni's was dampened considerably from the inside. One of her paws was visible at her side, but the other was buried within the folds of the fabric. It shifted over her front, causing the fabric to dance.

If Tobias could have blushed brighter, he might have done. As it was, too much of his blood remained much further below his waist; his malehood hadn't flagged in the slightest,

despite the seed he'd already spent in and on the hyena servant's face. Lingering shame and persistent lust fought themselves inside him, but he knew that the battlefield between the two had been forever changed. No orgasm he'd ever brought himself had ever felt the way it had when Juni brought him to it. He doubted they would ever be the same again.

And so he cleared his throat, eyes still on her front and her barely concealed efforts as she looked up at him. "Do you... ah... need something to help with... with that?"

She simply stared back at him for a moment, even as a smile began to creep across her muzzle once more. "I wouldn't want to take advantage, my prince. Not unless you were certain."

That Tobias knew he wasn't. He was definitely not certain about a whole lot of things. His whole life had, in only the last few minutes, found itself turned entirely upside down again. Old feelings brought up anew. Honesty with himself about them. Flagrant disregard of his own beliefs, and of his commitment to Sarina – even if she herself had insisted upon it – would never sit right with him.

And yet right then, flush with hormones and awakened needs and desires and with an apparently willing and eager outlet for them standing right before him, Tobias couldn't find himself lingering on his lack of certainties. Instead he found himself sitting up further and reaching out to her. She placed her not-as-busy paw in his and allowed him to pull her closer. She shuffled between his legs and smiled down at him as she licked a string of his spent seed from the corner of her muzzle.

He shuddered in turn as his shaft needfully pulsed. Tobias nodded up to her, and she lifted a leg to step over one of the prince's. She guided him down and onto his back again as she knelt down over his middle. Heat, wet and powerful, brushed past the tip of his shaft and brought with it the urge to rise up; to sink in; to mount and rut and breed, and he knew that if he could be certain of only a single thing right then, it was that he was going to.

That heat then sank down along his shaft, Tobias moaned alongside Juni, and the time for thinking was long passed.